Wangechi Mutu wonders why butterfly wings leave powder on the fingers, there was a coup today in Kenya.

Binyavanga Wainaina
1. We are made by our archives. Each of us is ourselves, too.

2. This is a short biography of us inside Wangechi Mutu.


4. They are nice to babies.

5. The first few days her parents considered calling her Susan, Anne, Ruth. An aunt from Nyeri strongly suggested the name Purity Scholastica to sit next to Wangechi on the birth certificate. A family friend was sure Jackie Onassis Mutu would have worked much better.


7. Franklin Boukaka began to transfer his moral outrage from song to action. He joined a group of disaffected Congolese with socialist leanings in a plot to overthrow the government of Congo-Brazzaville. The attempted revolt of February 22, 1972 ended in failure. Although Boukaka’s name appeared on lists of arrested participants, his death was announced a few days later. Many Congolese suspected he had been summarily executed. In his brief but active career, Boukaka grew from teenaged pop singer to principled social critic. Combining lovely melodies with trenchant lyrics, he critiqued his people’s changing lifestyles and goaded the ruling elite in a manner similar to that of Bob Marley and Fela Kuti. (Gary Stewart, Rumba on the River, Verso, London, 2011)

8. Wangechi Mutu.


13. Ubuntu Linux operating system free software named after the Southern African philosophy of ubuntu (literally, “human-ness”), which often is translated as “humanity towards others” or “the belief in
a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity". Ubuntu Operating System (Wikipedia).

14. For the first six months of her life Wangechi lives with a mobile left eyebrow. Every time her mum takes her to the doctor the feral eyebrow is calm. It moves unhindered up and down her forehead; it moves to the left of her forehead; it moves to the right of her forehead.

15. Now you see it, now you don’t.

16. Idi Amin has taken over Uganda. Wangechi Mutu’s father buys a Peugeot 504. Baba Wangechi and her uncles and some aunts love to smoke Rex Cigarettes. All Kenyan beer bottles are stumpy and green. Over beer adults discuss where they were when Jim Reeves died in a plane crash.

17. Bonanza is on television.

18. And The Man From Atlantis with Patrick Duffy.

19. Yellow Submarine.

20. Yaliotokea.


22. The Jetsons. Then The Flintstones.


24. Baby Wangechi’s eyebrow returns to position whenever a viewer seeks a witness. One night her father sees it sitting right above her right eyebrow. He screams.

25. Wangechi’s newly Christianized home village, once named kwa Wangu wa Makeri, was agitated to near violence by the idea Wangechi’s demonic eyebrow.

26. They soon forget, for many of them are also riveted by Bonanza which shows on the small black and white television in the meditation room just behind the community center of Church of the.

27. Gikuyus love Cowboys and country music and American Bluegrass.

28. Bloodstreams are pumping with the feeling of being newly independent from Colonialism.

29. 1975. Wangechi is four and one-quarter years old.

30. Wangechiiii! Wangechiiii! Mum is calling.

Left: Oh, Madonna! 2010
Mixed media ink, paint, collage on Mylar
91.5 x 54 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery
31. You are busy planning in your head to be a supermodel Kenyan cowgirl nomad, a four-year-old Afro-girl with tulle claws and steel killing teeth.
32. And you know that you have not been cow-herding. You are just dreaming you are.
33. Wangechii. Wangechii. It is your mum, there in the distance. You are four-ish.
34. It is not day. It is night. Your eyes are sticky. You know that kiss, your mother’s fever kiss? It comes to you every year. She sings softly and spits her chew into your mouth, herbs and hot mush, pastes of beans, blood and milk, in small bits.
35. Then your mum croons and goes out to stick her beak in the belly of a motorcycle trapped in a fashion shoot. Even now you can smell burning meat. Your fingers dreambling!
36. “Wangechi Ngechi!!!”
37. It is sleeply-late, and you are sure you have herded the whole day and sit under a tree in the last heat of dry near Lake Naivasha. You know you are wrong. Blurred cows mumble and groan with gas and grass in their bellies. An Anthro-Geographic Lion looms. You scratch your vagina idly and think of your claws tearing his belly.
38. “Wake Up!”
39. You are Wangechi. Soon, evening is coming, the first small coolings are present, the cattle are still, your friend’s play-fights have become murmurs and warm whispers, flesh-slapping games and giggles. You blink one eye open, and the softening sun burns your sight neon-blind. From your eyeshut shiny black tunnel you are carrying tumbling limbs on night-raid runs, and now, in transition, you see a thousand twisted
acacia-men walking toward you, the fading sun behind them.
40. Where you are all fogged up and hazy.
41. Wangechiiii Wangechiiii
42. No, Wangeci, inside your head a thousand hairy caterpillars are grazing and chewing mildly, stinging and tingling. Your mother’s arms are soft, but hurt. You smell hospital smells.
43. You are Wangeci.
44. You are unconscious. Your mother is beside herself
45. They move you from Church of the Blood Hospital to Kikuyu Eye Hospital, to examine your eyebrow, your strange fevers.
46. Cow-herd! You can hear your knee-bones scream, and you move more efficiently through the cooling breeze, your body becomes wind, and in the ripe attacking dirt, your heart glows because you will be the first to feel your hands grope at your nearest sleeping friend’s body. She snorts, you cover her mouth, put your mouth at her ear, and say the secret word.
47. A bull back jerks upwards in your ears, and coughs out a deep painful moo, a long painful jet of hot piss on the ground, and the cows are excited and gather together. Your body huuurts.
48. They say you have Human Bovine Petechial Fever (Ondiri disease). Diagnosed only in Kenya. Symptoms: widespread petechial ecchymotic haemorrhages on the mucosal surfaces, and throughout the serosal and subserosal surfaces of body organs, cavities. Fatal in up to 50% of untreated cases. Transmitted by an arthropod vector, yet to be identified.
49. Wangechiiii
50. Wangeci. Your fever-dream is crumpling in fits and starts, the clarity shifts, and you start awake. Her warm body and heartbeat follows the shape of your movements, as the next shape wakes, and

Left: Sketchbook Drawing, 1997
Pen and ink on paper
10.5 x 8 inches
Courtesy of the artist
the next, and guns are collected. and you shall attack first. your personal girl-glory, chest-glowing like a crown of vinyl sunthorn stinging in your ears and neck as you arrive home at sunset with a crowd of cattle and your troops cheering behind you.

52. Wangechi wakes up days later. Fine after eating Aspro-junior. And more. It was fuzzy sweet. Mooo.

53. “I know not to go too far and over-complete it because at that paint it’s quivering and almost has a vibration.” (Wangechi Mutu)

54. 1977. The family moves to Nairobi.

55. Wangechi is six. This is a story taught the first few weeks of Kenyan primary school. Wangu wa Makeri, a woman and Gikuyu chief. Her dictatorship of women is toppled when the men decide to get the women of the village pregnant.

56. Wangechi is six years old. It is blurry and feels sooo D.I.S.C.O. She is D.I.S.C.O.

57. She can see their desire. Star-bursts of heart stopping thrill-power in her sun-blown pupils, coils and patterns of neon greens, reds, yellows, sun-shaped and pupil-shaped explosions of distorted light. Sitting on the lawn, as Voice of Kenya General Service radio plays Mahanja Mike. She shuts her eyes fast. In that moment her eyelids are a sky of shining blood-coloured flesh, with a fine glowing network of branches: Of fear and coming death. Or glory.

58. 1979.

59. She is D. Delirious. She is I. Irresistable. She is S-Super Sexy. She is C. Such a Cutie. She is O-O ooo.

60. They would have considered, the New Christians, cutting Wangechi’s clitoris for Anti-Colonial reasons in the 1920s.

61. She is D.I.S.C.O.

62. They go to Mission School in the 1930s, Not Knowing what they are releasing in their grandchild.

63. But knowing it is a kind of release. A painful one.

64. 1980s.

65. Kenya is in every fashion magazine, every

Left: Mountain of prayer, 2014
Collage painting on vinyl
Unframed: 77.5 x 90.2 cm, 30 1/2 x 35 1/2 in Framed: 89.2x101.6x7.3cm,351/8x40x27/8in
Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London
© Wangechi Mutu
animal print magazine. It is a big Safari Animal park fashion shoot. On Kenya Television too.

66. “Archives contains primary source documents that have accumulated over the course of an individual or organization’s lifetime, and are kept to show the function of that person or organization. They have been metaphorically defined as “the secretions of an organism.” (Wikipedia)

67. Kenya is where old Fashional Geographic magazines come to die. And Vogue, Playboy. Right On, Ebony, GQ.

68. There was a short frenzied season of drawing loopy psychedelic lollipops on Colonially sacred Nairobi bungalow’s walls!

69. Wangechi is asked by mum to go and choose a belt from Baba’s wardrobe.

70. She is mutinous after the first stroke she cries after the second. After the third, mum can’t take it, and hugs. Her eyebrow twitches. Her mother frowns in some confusion.

71. You are Wangechi. One racing-car ostrich crouches near, and you look at him, and he is carrying his fluffy bleeding entrails, clouds above are full of open nerve endings and painfully pink biolight. Breaktime in school.

72. Zebra-coloured tourist vans are part of Kenya’s national archive of images.

73. Mum’s New Imported magazines Smell Good. It feels great to cut them up with scissors.

74. You are Wangechi. You are swimming through the dreaming hot pondage in your head when they come for you. Your grandmother’s screams are stranded in between three soft hot thuds.

75. Masai chic. Postcards everywhere.

76. Your old fever time is only an occasional memory now. Snippets surge at random times. You are a Cowherd! Your ears rule every feeling. They silence the soft pad of flesh just below your kneebones which are cutting in the stones and dried sticks. Goat-legs are backwards. Magazine It Girls go hunting dressed in vinyl, for fur.

77. 1980s.

78. In a glorious three days of measles, Tree-
Top Orange Squash, Ribena and House of Manji biscuits, Wangechi read Alice in Wonderland.

79. “The chief difficulty Alice found at first was in managing her flamingo: she succeeded in getting its body tucked away, comfortably enough, under her arm, with its legs hanging down, but generally, just as she had got its neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it WOULD twist itself round and look up in her face, with such a puzzled expression that she could not help bursting out laughing: and when she had got its head down, and was going to begin again, it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself, and was in the act of crawling away: besides all this, there was generally a ridge or furrow in the way wherever she wanted to send the hedgehog to, and, as the doubled-up soldiers were always getting up and walking off to other parts of the ground, Alice soon came to the conclusion that it was a very difficult game indeed.” (Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland)

80. The tractor spareparts would make really nice earrings for a giant Wangechi alien warrior. Seven year old Wangechi wonders why butterfly wings leave powder on the fingers. There was a coup today in Kenya.

81. Blood soaks the streets of Nairobi. Whispers and fear everywhere.

82. Rich ripe jewels, drip from your nostrils, like screaming ovaries, and crushed iridescent insects in the sand on your verandah. Your tonsils are screaming.

83. Mums Magazine has a famished African Baby, like Madonna will.

84. “The Kikuyu were Matriarchal – power in the hands of women – before men finally overthrew them.”

85. Iman was discovered herding goats in Somaliland riding a zebra.

86. Barbie dolls are imported at great expense for a world-starved, Moi-ruled Kenya.

87. In the 1980s, Michael Jackson’s face melts sloooowly. We are soooo bored.

88. There was so little to watch. We wait months for the next development.

89. Kama Kama Kama Kama Kameleon, you come and go, you come and go and go—oh—oh—oh.


91. Lost of people are being arrested.

92. President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi banned toy guns and other foreign influenzas.

93. 1990.

94. Wangechi goes clubbing at The Carnivore for the first time in a friend’s stolen car wearing shoulder pads and bopping to Milli Vanilli. Early morning, sun is up, they crawl out scared and full of alcohol and Wangechi notices a crushed chameleon next to the ladies toilet. She leans to pick it up and thinks about cannibal butterflies, and giggles. It is leathery like silk. Driving past the Military hospital on Mbagathi Road, where, every few months, drunk teenagers in their parents’ borrowed cars, crashed, died, or were dismembered. They kissed. “Nyeri chics are really brown,” he said, “and when they grow up they beat their husbands.”

95. Wangechi is determined to become a Consultant Neurologist and act on International television. In her spare time, she will design slick clothes for thin white people.

96. Girl! Behind your crawling back, the lowering Western sun is heating up, not above the head where it is just everybody’s. It is yours now. It burns the skin of your neck. In the distant world outside this tunnel, the cattle have gathered together waiting to go back to the boma and they shuffle restless, complaining in your earlobes as you creep forward, in your private tunnel, with your private last sun. Your generation will make themselves the center of the West.

97. Girls gangs of rich plastic Nairobi. Sneer. Hot golden sunset magma of humiliation surges up your teenage throat, and you let it gurgle, not into tears or rage. No. You are
Wangechi. Cowherd Supermodel. You push it down back to the top of your stomach, and stretch your loose mobile mouth to its limits. Whenever you do this, you find that a crowd bubble of gentle laughter makes you the center of friends. But they are hostile now with your weakness in front of them.


99. Eddie Murphy is Coming to America.

100. Wangechi Mutu is going to America to study Fashion Merchandising for Safari-chic Cyborgettes with longish goat-legs and crippled bleeding gold boots.

101. But first she must study Medicine.

102. Like This.

103. uterine catarrh by Wangechi Mutu: This yellowing paper is an important piece of medical history. This young man has a third eye – a wisdom to offer? A possible insight? He too is a recipient (knowing or unknowing) of this knowledge – if only from a straight-laced high school lecture about syphilis. Ricord is an early, and substantial, original source about gynecological disorders. Part of our casual knowledge about this has filtered down from him. Our young man has magazine lips too: cutout pink lipstick lips, large and lush: the sort of lips some pay for collagen to get. How lucky, Wangechi seems to suggest somewhat wickedly? That lips are the one territory we have that are wanted by the magazine perceptions of How You Must Look. A bit of the lip is red, lipstick again. The lips are pasted on, and slightly out of place – and it starts to arrive that what seems grotesque here is not.

104. “The young man is in good health – and the shapes imposed upon him leave his face with integrity. The questions being asked here seem to be about membership: this black man is, too, an heir of medical and other histories that have come before him – but his choice and participation will be original – his colour, and its history, will...
bring their own contexts and insights. His third eye. His membership of this world has its inflammations; but has also wisdom. His third eye – digging deep into his brain, has received yellowed ideas, will provide eurekas and will give birth to things. It is not for nothing that his brain is a womb.”

Wangechi is unable to return home for seventeen years. A simple mistake left her battling to legalise her stay in America.

Wangechi did not return to Kenya until 2012.

Your private day-dreams have stolen you from them. Your smile makes other people smile. Now, they jeer at you, and when the now soft blue bubbles of laughter magma surge up and turn the red sunset gold, your limbs leap up with them and, you throw yourself into the herd of friends, elbows and crowd-noise, and race forward, faster than all of them, limbs freer, cows chasing behind.

Exile. Paperless exile. Much of the time, locked inside a studio. In-between. For seventeen years.

Wangechi Mutu’s work makes new things, and remixes. Her work became a middle-passage, never real in America, never real at home. She builds a world to live in that Africans can inhabit. An African global citizen is the inheritor of all archives.
She is an early African provoking the season of Afro-futures. Once distressed, distorted, re-made, this African global citizen releases us from uggaa booga fears of the hegemony that makes these magazines, and freezes us as one-dimensional agents of their glossy spectacle.

117. Just consume, brown world, just eat what we throw at you. Beg, African, Beg for Aid. The hegemony fills all our senses with its spectacle. And then we realize that you can remix in exile.

118. The archive is ours to do as we will with it.

119. Remix: religious ritual that removes demons of fear and releases imagination.

120. It is 2012. They gave Wangechi a greencard!

121. And she is on the first plane out home for a visit to Kenya.

122. China is coming. Brazil. Africa heaves with arrival. Stands and departs to who knows where. Running, killing, imagining, not stagnant, vibrant, rotting, breaking borders, beautiful new forms of people trying out standing on their own.

123. Wangechis everywhere.

124. “Pleased to present a solo exhibition of new work by Wangechi Mutu titled Nitarudini, Kiswahili for I plan to return, Nitarudini. Nitarudini expresses the complexity of longing for a place that is alive in the memory in a very different way than in the physical reality – a place as evasive and fleeting as the identities one negotiates when they are relocated, bringing into play issues of transformation,

Left: Beneath lies the Power, 2014
Collage painting on vinyl
Unframed: 212.1 x 156.2 cm 831/2x611/2in
Framed: 226.5 x 171.5 x 7.3 cm
Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London
© Wangechi Mutu
125. Oh! We forgot to mention the armless, loving, legless, floating, gorgeous foetal season before the baby. Remix: Only a small body part now, in the making of something utterly new.

126. Wangechi’s house-studio is too full of stuff. Rivers and Banks are Bursting. Everywhere. Bursting with the closed weight of 17 years of archives and ideas. She wants to feel lighter, truer again.

127. “Wangechi Mutu’s interest in the subtle distinction between Nitarudi and Ninarudi is embedded in the ever-so-slight difference between the desire and promise to return, versus the absolute insistence and the capability to come back to a place.”

128. I plan to return I am returning

129. Her archives jump into a Goodyear Blimp video, that decides to fly back to Kenya. The video has been slowly swelling up in studio over the last seventeen years, the whole world digested by capital and your archive, or remaking.

130. The flat wall hangings, swollen into giant helium video. Sort of.

131. She can leave America legally now. We, the rest of us, are no longer bored. We eat the world. In our swelling gorging body, our bright dangerous digital lights, we are carrying many things and her fake hair, magazine parts, machinery, cut-outs Beads, Porn Kings, viable monster babies who hunt, jewels, gynecological drawings, Brooklyn, blood, flowers, petals, blood, knives are high heels, we carry worlds of dead mushrooms.

132. The Blimp blings with Santigold. It flies out of Wangechi’s studio window, burping eaten birds, it re-crosses the Atlantic on video Africa Rising is Eating Everything.

133. It bursts and falls into the sea in the Atlantic. After vomiting toxins and ejecting the hot air, Wangechi, a mum now: lean, honest, mean, feral and nguva, now has to swim back new truths.

134. Wa-Nguva, accompanied by pythons in vinyl land, feral in a weave, and starving after sinking and bursting over the Atlantic, Mami Watas her way through Goree Island, West Africa, Congo, Tanzania into the Indian Ocean, and swims across the lagoon in Mpeketoni, to Lamu where Nguva looks to eat again.

135. And Nguva is Wangechi in grit, flesh and blood performing. Too.

136. Back for a season of home-making. It’s hard for a mermaid to find her feet. There is work to do.

137. She is starving.

Notes:

1 From the press release for the exhibition Nitarudi Ninarudi at Susan Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 2012.
I see Jalada’s Afrofuture issue as an expression of the Pan-African vision of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturistic art has always been about crossing the borders of time and space: it reaches into the distant past as well as the far future, and across the traumatic breach of the Middle Passage. I love that this anthology brings together voices and visions from different parts of Africa and the diaspora—to me, that’s the true spirit of Afrofuturism.”

Sofia Somatar, Fiction Editor

“Even our continent’s past is rightly contested: so, what about its possible futures? They are places of speculation: of hopes for something better, but equally of dystopian fears. The poems in Jalada’s forthcoming Afrofutures publication predict both, from across the diverse continent. But one thing about the future is known for sure: the Jalada anthology will be something worth reading, a miscellany that provides us with a range of plausible, beautiful, horrible options.”

Stephen Derwent Partington, Poetry Editor

Jalada’s Afrofuture Anthology will be released on January 15th 2015. The Prelude, which features Binyavanga Wainaina’s profile of Wangeci Mutu, and her art, is a perfect expression of this shared dream among African artists to redefine how we envision future Africa. A group of Jalada editors are hard at work on the submissions, and here is what they have to say about it all.

Moses Kilolo, Managing Editor
Jalada’s Afrofuture anthology promises to shift perceptions and to enhance realities. It will make you think a new thought and feel a new emotion. Poems and stories from an Africa no longer afraid of its imagination. A generation of young minds willing to co-create their future. It will fizzle and pop in the mind: a titillating addition to our literary landscape.

Kiprop Kimutai, Fiction Editor

As a reader, Afro-futurist writing, allows me to lose myself in vividly imagined worlds deeply and specifically rooted in who I am, as ‘African’, as ‘woman’, as ‘other’. When lost in the words, I explore and occasionally find myself. As for being an editor:

“You write to communicate to the hearts and minds of others what’s burning inside you. We edit to let the fire show through the smoke”

(Arthur Plotnik)

This anthology is a raging forest fire.

Ann Moraa, Fiction Editor

Orem Ochiel, Fiction Editor

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Binyavanga Wainaina, from the Essay